

metamora courthouse

STATE MEMORIAL

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THE COURTHOUSE

Metamora Courthouse is one of the two remaining court structures on the old Eighth Judicial Circuit. The other remaining courthouse is Mt. Pulaski.

In addition to its historical value, the courthouse is considered valuable because of its excellent classic revival architecture and its construction from native materials.

In 1843 the county seat was moved from Versailles to the village then called Hanover. The following year, Hanover was named Metamora. The new designation, said to be an Indian word for King Philip, resulted from the discovery of another Hanover among Illinois communities.

Woodford County remained in the Eighth Circuit only until 1857, but Metamora survived as county seat and its court continued with full dockets until the county headquarters was moved to Eureka in 1894. Thereafter, the building was used for church suppers, school graduation exercises, meetings, entertainment and similar gatherings. The judge and jury chambers became kitchens.

Construction: The courthouse was designed and erected in 1845 by a local contractor, David Irving, at a cost of \$4,400. Irving baked his own bricks in a kiln west of the village, felled the timbers from the nearby forest, trimmed the trees into logs and hauled them to a local sawmill for cutting into joists and flooring.

In 1870, an interior rear stairway was removed outside to the front of the building and in 1884, office wings were added. The wings were removed and the staircase restored to its original location when the courthouse became a state memorial in 1921.

A 40 x 50-foot two-story structure with office-lined corridors running through it, the old courthouse retains the aura of the hearty days of the 1840s and 1850s. The Eighth Circuit courtroom on the second floor is being restored with almost all of the original furnishings. The first floor is a museum containing pioneer items of the type used in the Woodford County area during the Lincoln era.

COURT INCIDENT

"The trial was proceeding poorly for Melissa Goings, charged with murdering her husband. Her attorney, Abraham Lincoln, called for a recess to confer with his client and he led her from the courtroom.

"When court reconvened and Mrs. Goings could not be found, Lincoln was accused of advising her to flee, a charge he vehemently denied. He explained, however, that the defendant had asked him where she could get a drink of water, and he had pointed out that Tennessee had darn good water!

"She was never again seen in Illinois."

This incident—confirmed in the Common Law Record Book of 1857-61—and other Lincolnian anecdotes are part of the rich lore surrounding Metamora Courthouse.

THE CIRCUIT COURT SYSTEM

Illinois' circuit court system, adopted in 1839, was patterned after that of Kentucky. The state was divided into multi-county circuits, each with a judge who traveled from county to county within his jurisdiction until he completed the judicial business of each county. Court sessions sometimes lasted as long as six weeks at a county seat.

Following the same route were groups of traveling lawyers who met with their clients on courthouse lawns, under nearby trees or on the public streets. At night they gathered convivially in village inns. Some of these men had been well educated in the east, while others, like Lincoln, had little formal training. "Circuit-riding" provided a real test of an attorney's legal skill and wisdom. Attorneys of Lincoln's day served a thinly scattered population and had to ride the circuit in order to make a living.

Eighth Judicial Circuit: It was a hard life with small fees, pioneer living conditions and extensive, difficult travel. The Eighth Judicial Circuit, for example, was very large, at one time encompassing 11,000 square miles, slightly larger than

the state of Maryland. There were periodic alterations, but none of these appreciably reduced the circuit's size during the time Lincoln followed the route regularly.

Lincoln labored on the Eighth Circuit full time for a dozen years and on a part time basis for several more, but he seemed to thrive in that environment. His famous story telling sessions, the close friendships he formed and the political contacts he made in those years apparently compensated him for the weary hours of travel, the poor food and inferior lodging. Except for the two years he served in Congress, he devoted at least half of each year to circuit traveling until he became President.

DEEDED TO THE STATE

Metamora Courthouse became the Lincoln Memorial Courthouse Museum when the General Assembly accepted the village's offer to deed the property unconditionally to the state. The dedication and acceptance address was given August 26, 1921, by former Governor Joseph W. Fifer, who had appeared as a lawyer on many cases in the historic building.

It was Gov. Fifer who had recommended to the Metamora Old Settlers' Society in 1920 that the transfer be made as a means of preserving the old courthouse.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION . . .

Nearby Lincoln points of interest are the Lincoln Home, the Old State Capitol and the Lincoln Tomb, all in Springfield. Other state parks and memorials involving Lincoln include Lincoln Log Cabin, Lincoln Salt Creek, Lincoln Trail, Lincoln Trail Homestead, Lincoln's New Salem, Lincoln Monument, Lincoln Trail Monument, Mt. Pulaski Courthouse, Postville Courthouse and Vandalia Statehouse.

For further information concerning Illinois State Parks and Memorials write to the Department of Conservation, Division of Education, State Office Building, Springfield, 62706.

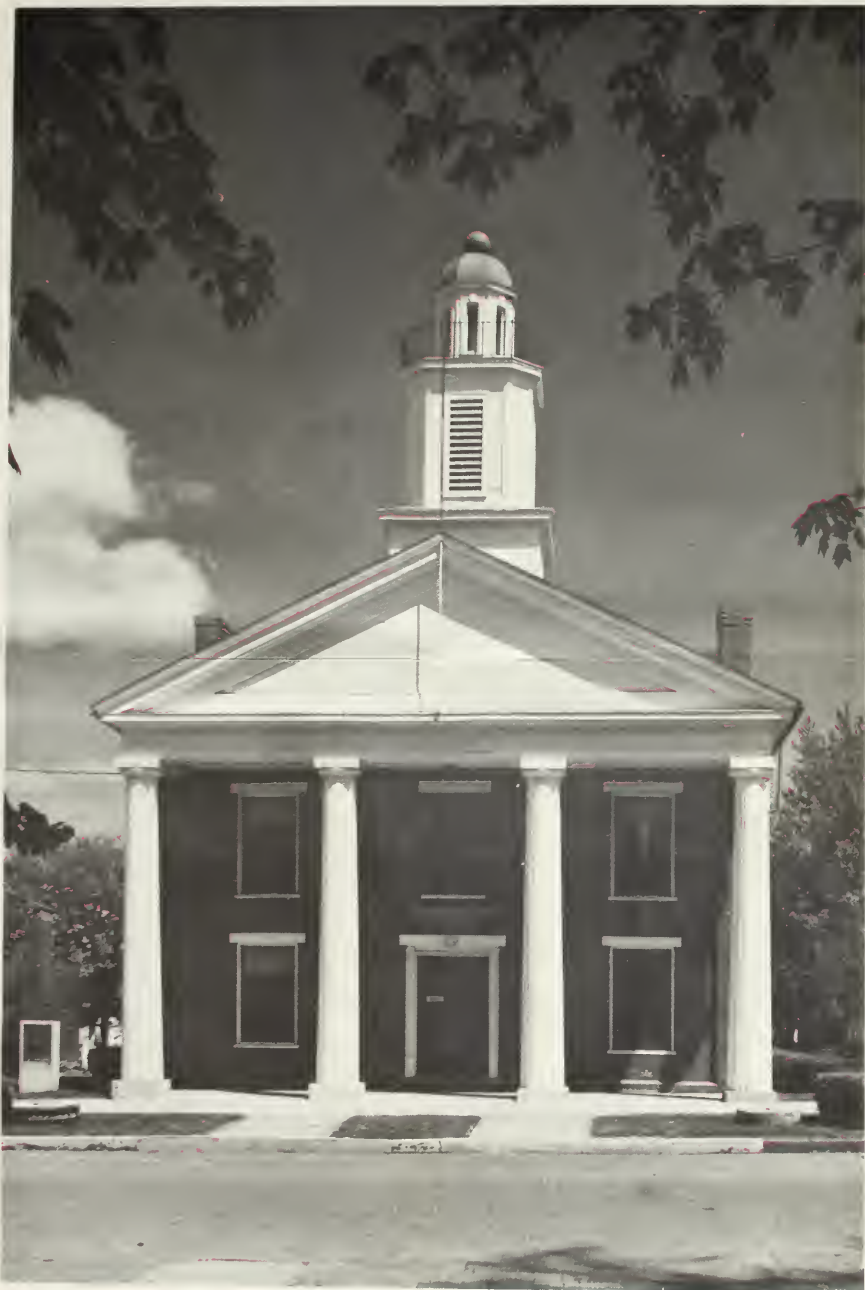
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